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Mobile Phones and Libraries: experimenting with the technology

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I have been reflecting on my changing attitudes to mobile phones in Libraries over the years. It was not so long ago that the mere mention of mobiles sent Subject Librarians blood pressure soaring and created a strong desire to stick notices decrying their use all over the Library. I'd become used to this, but more recently I think views have changed. Possibly this is a change in user behaviour as the urge to bellow into phones seems to have passed, even though to suggest the possibility of switching them off is still treated as an infringement of human rights. I think I've grown used to them, and I think I've even begun to see them as not just useful but also rather essential myself. So it was in this context that I found myself being excited by the idea of experimenting with their use in the Library here at the University of Bath, encouraged and inspired by my e-learning colleagues.

Mobile phones are, of course, ubiquitous. I suspect all our students have one, probably almost always on their person, particularly, it seems, when in the Library. Many of these phones are quite high-spec, and our students are confident using them and experimenting with new applications. So, this seems like a good institution to experiment a little; which is exactly what we did last year. Encouraged both by e-learning and by JISC funding we began to consider possible applications for QR (Quick Response) codes. These are 3D barcodes which can be scanned and read by camera phones with the appropriate application present. If your phone has a QR Code Reader application installed you can scan the code and it will link your phone to a webpage or specific content. So, by taking a picture of the code with your phone you can jump to information we have uniquely associated with the code. This could be an action such as sending a text, or, there could be an embedded URL in the code which takes you to a web page. For example, you could generate a QR code (each is unique) which links a poster about a library training session to the session time and location which can be directly captured on the phone itself.

This is an example of QR Code. By scanning this with a compatible mobile phone, you can download an MP3 audio tour of the third floor of the University of Bath Library to your phone.



This is one of the applications we experimented with. The other was around references from our catalogue. We have very long classification numbers in some areas (no, I'm not boasting) and although our users carry phones, they are often seen searching for paper and pen to scribble down class numbers on their way to finding books. Our Systems Librarian wrote a programme which dynamically created a QR code for each title on the library catalogue, if it was available on the shelf and not on loan at the time the search was carried out. All a user had to do was take a picture of the QR code on the screen. The QR reader instantaneously translated this into the information embedded in the code, which in this case contained the class number, author and title of the item. No need for paper. The user could then move directly to the item, and even save the reference for future use.

This seemed like a fine idea to us and actually quite ecologically sound too, sparing the paper trail. So did it work? Well, technologically from our end it was easy, so our Systems Librarian tells me, but there were some barriers for the users. Not all phones have QR Readers on them, and although Readers can be downloaded this is only to the newer camera phones. However, a survey revealed that this should fit with many of our student's existing kit. The students also indicated they were confident with technology and that many of them had heard of QR codes. This seemed likely as 30% of our student body is international and although QR codes don't have a big presence in the UK as yet, they certainly do in countries such as Japan where they are widely used in marketing.

The main lesson we learnt though was not to believe everything we were led to expect! Having launched the QR codes on the catalogue and following some joined-up publicity with the student union, we soon found that not many people were using them. We even had an incentive as we had asked a local business to make chocolate QR codes for us. These could be claimed at the Issue Desk by users just showing their mobile screens, once they had scanned a code from the catalogue, and presenting their library card. A message would then appear on our Issue Desk screen saying 'give me chocolate', with an option for 'yes' if they hadn't already claimed one and 'no' if they had. Even chocolate wasn't enough, though, to encourage their use by as many students as we had hoped for. We tried again with our E-learning colleagues setting up a stall in the Library, helping users to load the Readers. This was useful as e-learning could to re-assess the support needed to get the technology to work. A few more students began to participate and the chocolates began to move out of my office.

It's a year or so on now and QR codes remain on our catalogue as an option for our users. However, we don't know how many people use them because of the nature of the use via a photograph of an automatically generated code means it is not possible to collect statistics. I suspect use is not high but as phones become fancier and more of them come with QR Readers as standard it might be time for another 'push'. I'm beginning to see QR codes creeping into other areas too such as on airline and train booking confirmations and even on Tesco clubcard statements. My thoughts at the moment are that Induction for new students would be the ideal time to experiment. If we could 'QR' the campus in conjunction with other areas such as the student union for induction events and other such activities, this may add sufficient value to encourage students to engage with and to use the technology. Once they've done so we could really start to play!

To read more about this project and QR codes, please see the M-Libraries 2 conference proceedings due to be published later this year.